
The Cultural Work of Sejong the Great

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Sejong's Cultural and Scientific Projects

In his own time and later, Sejong was famous for the number and quality of his cultural projects. It would be quite impossible to describe these at length, but a short summary will at least suggest the range of activity and the close involvement of the king himself in the work.

To begin with the humane sciences, Sejong ordered the compilation or revision of the official annals of the reigns of his three predecessors on Chosŏn's throne, and followed closely the activities of the "Spring and Autumn Hall," which held the official archives of the state. He established the procedures by which, after the death of each king, that king's official chronicle, or *sillok*, was to be compiled, and he began the practice of making extra copies for storage in four branch archives in different regions of the country. Because of this foresight we still have these records today, the main Spring and Autumn Hall copies having been destroyed in 1592 during the disorders caused by the Hideyoshi invasions. Beginning in the reign of Sejong's son Sejo (1455-1468), the annals were printed. Today, the collected annals of all of Chosŏn's kings over 518 years take up over 115,000 pages printed in the traditional format, and are collected in a modern edition (the *Chosŏn wangjo sillok*) of 31,000 pages in 51 large volumes. Another of Sejong's historical projects was the compilation of the official history of the preceding dynasty, Koryŏ. Although much valuable source material had already been lost or dispersed by his time, and in spite of lingering political problems involving the treatment of some key events and personalities of late Koryŏ, the *Koryŏ sa* is remarkable for its coverage, coherence and organization. Both in this dynastic history and in the royal annals, the historiographical methodology was influenced by long-established Chinese and Korean precedents,

but the historiographical quality of the work inspired by Sejong is outstanding by any criterion and shows a special dimension that can be credited to him.

The geographical projects of Sejong were of equal scope. In 1434, detailed maps of the kingdom were prepared, although they have unfortunately not survived. They were based on previous cartography and records, but principally on a thorough survey of the nation completed two years earlier. A final, comprehensive gazetteer based on this work can be found in the appendices to Sejong's annals, and is now a rich source of information on early Chosŏn administration and local lore. A draft of the original survey for a single province still survives, showing the thoroughness of Sejong's overall plan. The survey recorded the formal details of administrative geography: population, irrigation facilities, key economic crops, local manufactures, regional defense, education, important mountains and waterways, communications, boundaries, regional distances accurate to the foot, and useful information on the social and family system. All this provided a solid foundation for later maps and gazetteers.

Agriculture and agronomy attracted Sejong's interest at an early date. He ordered surveys of agricultural conditions throughout the kingdom, the collection and improvement of cropping techniques, irrigation methods, and tools, and the comparative study of Chinese agriculture. Several Chinese farm handbooks were edited in versions incorporating local Korean practice and distributed throughout the nation. In order to more accurately measure Korean agricultural productivity and to more fairly assess crop value for taxation purposes, rain gauges were devised and installed, careful rainfall records were maintained in each district town, and soil types were studied and classified according to specifications of six grades of fertility. This work not only rationalized